Idaho Standards for Achievement
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NEWS RELEASE

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Idaho one of two states using computers for testing

Thousands of students will take the state's new standards-based state tests on computer this month, thanks to a lot of hardware and hard work by Idaho's schools.

Idaho and South Dakota are the only states in the nation to use computerized assessments for the bulk of their testing program, according to the non-profit education research group Achieve, Inc. The group also reports that only a handful of states use computers for a portion of state tests.

Preparation to automate this test has required a significant effort on the part of local districts in developing computer labs suitable for the testing process.

Beginning Monday, Sept. 16, schools will test all second through 10th graders on the Idaho Standards Achievement Test (ISAT) in reading, language arts, and math.

"We are pleased with how many districts are able to deliver this assessment by computer," said Marilyn Howard, Superintendent of Public Instruction. "During this pilot, we expect to learn what challenges other

districts and schools face as we prepare for a time when all students will be expected to take the ISAT on computer."

The State Board of Education selected an electronic format for the ISAT because of a computer's capacity to quickly adapt or adjust questions based on the student's response and its power to provide scores to teachers immediately.

State Board of Education President Blake Hall said the computerized assessments will be useful to schools and parents by providing information on the progress their students are making and assisting in focusing instruction on areas of student need.

"We wanted teachers to have immediate access to the information and a computerized system allows for that," Hall said. "Schools who used this method before it was adopted statewide say it is a powerful tool for teachers in the classroom."

The computerized format also is less expensive than giving the paper/pencil form of the ISAT. Hall said the goal is for all districts to give the spring ISAT on computer.

The Legislature approved the board's testing plan in the spring of 2002. The state's 114 school districts have prepared their schools in just eight months to be ready for fall testing.

To administer the tests, districts need student testing stations (a computer with at least a Pentium processor and 32 megabytes of RAM, networked to a server.) For most schools, grouping computers into a lab will be how the tests are given. It is estimated that more than 9,600 computers are necessary to test all students in grades 2-10.

Networking Specialist Dan Hawkins with the State Department of Education and experts from the Northwest Evaluation Association, the state's testing contractor, worked with districts throughout the spring and summer to help them prepare for the fall testing.

"Initially there were some concerns about whether we would be able to bring this test online statewide for the fall," Hawkins said.   "However, as we began working with districts and determined that a single computer could be used to assess at least three students in a day, that helped relieve concerns."

In addition, the state also expanded the testing window from three weeks to five weeks beginning Sept. 16 and ending Oct. 18.

Hawkins estimates that, for various reasons, about 24 districts will need to give a paper/pencil version of the ISAT to students this fall.

Since 1994, the Legislature has invested more than $81 million in school technology. In addition to ongoing maintenance and upgrading of computers, the money has been used to install wiring, provide Internet access, purchase software, and train staff.

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